

## **Indian Democracy in Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger***

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Aravind Adiga, the winner of the Booker prize (2008), criticizes the Indian democracy throughout his novel, *The White Tiger*, in the voice of the protagonist, Balram. He writes to the Premier of the "Freedom-Loving Nation of China" as a citizen of India which has never been free even after it attained independence in August 1947 because things have remained the same here in spite of parliamentary democracy and regular elections. Whereas China, despite dictatorship and Communist rule, has made giant strides in every sphere of life. He therefore seeks to present the ground realities of life to the visiting dignitary as against the official rosy picture of India as held up by the prime minister, his associates and the official documents.

Here it becomes impetus to understand about Indian democracy, before proceeding further.

India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic and republic country. Thus we have five constitutional principles: **Sovereignty, socialism, secularism Democracy and republic**. The preamble of our constitution also ensures **justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity** to all the people of the country. Additionally six fundamental rights are recognized by our constitution. And they are 1. Right to **freedom**. (Liberty) 2. Right to **equality** 3. Right to **freedom of religion** 4. **Cultural and Educational Right**. 5. Right **against exploitation** And 6. Right to **constitutional remedies**.

If we analyse each item in the three categories, they fall under the following Principles. 1. Liberty 2. Equality 3. Fraternity 4. Secularism 5. Democracy (People as the ultimate source of sovereignty) 6. Justice (Constitutional remedies) 7. Compulsory free Education 8. Right against exploitation. We could add Right to privacy as the 9<sup>th</sup> one, as it has been recently added by the supreme court in the fundamental rights. We could call them **the basic principles of Indian democracy** .

Now let us discuss how Aravind Adiga directly or indirectly criticizes the function of each principle through his mouth piece Balram. There are many instances to be quoted for each principle but only one or two are here cited.

### **(1) Liberty**

The main basis of democracy is liberty. It means freedom, authority, autonomy, and independency. But Balram says that 99.9 per cent of the Indian people are in perpetual servitude. They are so trained that “if you can put the key of emancipation in a man’s hands, he will throw it back with you with a curse”. There is no dictatorship or secret police in India. But a handful of men in the country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent to exist in everlasting slavery. He compares the plight of such people to hundreds of pale hens and roosters, “stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling for breathing space; the whole cage giving a horrible stench- the stench of terrified, feathered flesh” (TWT 173).

Balram is trapped in the Rooster Coop when, after having signed the confessional statement for the accident caused by his Master Ashok’s wife. When Balram sees Stork, (Ashok’s father) “an old-fashioned master” who knows how to protect his servants. But all that the Stork wants Balram is to massage his feet. Not only to Stork, but to Ashok too he has to press the feet. Thus perpetual servitude has been ingrained in his character, but when he sees the gross injustice around, he wants to rebel against his present condition and takes revenge by killing Ashok on his way to handover the money to a politician’s sidekicks. At last, he is a ‘free man’. But only Balram has obtained liberty but others remain in a perpetual servitude.

### **(2) Equality**

Special emphasis is laid on equality in democracy and there is no disparity among the people on the basis of caste, creed, religion and position or status. But in the novel, there are many instances that stand against the principle.

When Balram approached an old driver to get training, the former was unwilling to train him because of his halwai (sweetmaker) caste, saying that “only a boy from the warrior castes can manage that. You need to have aggression in your blood. Muslims, Rajputs, Sikhs—they're fighters, they can become drivers. You think sweet-makers can last long in fourth gear?”(TWT 56)

When for the first time Balram met Ashoke, in search of job, to give job for Balram, Ashoke wanted to know Balram’s cast and the cast position in the society. Because the rich people didn’t want the low cast people as there servants. ““Halwai...” He turned to the small dark man. "What caste is that top or bottom?" And I knew that my future depended on the answer to this question” (TWT 62). Balram answered “Bottom, sir”. Since he was from a low caste he was appointed as a second driver made to sleep

on the floor and whereas the Ram Persad, the first driver slept on a bed. This is an instance for the inequality on the basis of Caste.

Balram reveals the fact that inequality exists in India on the basis of economic condition. “To sum up-in the olden days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes; Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies; eat-or get eaten up.” (TWT 64). The rich live to eat and the poor live to be eaten up by the former. Here Adiga ironically criticizes the principle of equality and liberty.

### (3) Fraternity

The word ‘Fraternity, refers to mean a group of people sharing a common profession or interests. It implies friendship, mutual support, brotherhood and peaceful coexistence.

But the novel is full of blackmail, treachery and violence. Balram slept in the servants’ dormitory at the basement of the apartment block in New Delhi but, due to unbearable teasing and raucous behavior of co-drivers, he preferred to sleep in a horrible and cockroach-infested room with peeling cheap whitish plaster on a ‘flimsy little bed’ to be by himself.

The Nepali Guard, Ram Bahadur wanted five thousand rupees in cash for recommending Balram’s name as the one who would drive the masters to Delhi in the Honda City and live there for three months, adding that Balram would get three thousand rupees a month as salary. When Balram expressed his inability to pay up, Ram Bahadur said that he would recommend Ram Persad’s name to the master for this prestigious assignment. But Balram spied on Ram Persad and discovered that the man was really a Muslim who had lied about his religion in order to gain employment. Soon Ballram ran back to the house and shared his discovery with Ram Bahadur, who had been a part of this scam because the masters trusted him. Ballram gave the Nepali guard a tight slap. By that time Ram Persad (or whatever his Muslim name was) knew that the game was up; he quietly packed up and left. Balram was now servant number one in the household a reprimanded.

Ashok treated Balrlam well, he did not hit him or spit on him like other masters; Ashok paid him four thousand rupees a month and he had been raising his salary without asking; Thus Ashok trusted Balram fully that’s why when Mukesh, Pinky madam and Uma madam (to be married for the second time) instructed Ashok to be careful with Balram or to send him out, Ashok was adamant not to send him out. Yet Balram started stealing money from his master in order to sleep with a white woman.

When one evening it was drizzling, Balram lured Ashok out of the car on the pretext that there was a problem and murdered him with a broken liquor bottle, even though he knew that his entire family would be wiped out by the Stork and his goons back in Lakmanagarh village for this act of perfidy treachery.

#### (4) The people as ultimate source of sovereignty

In a democracy, people are the ultimate source of sovereignty, and the government derives its power from them. For this purpose, elections take place in India after every five years.

But the way it is held in India, is ridiculed in the novel *The White tiger*. Balram recounts his election experience when he was working at the tea shop in Laxmangarh. The teashop owner ordered all his workers to stop working and march to the school, where the electoral officer declared that all the young workers at the teashop were eighteen, and therefore eligible to vote. “I got a birth day from the government’. The ‘eligible’ voters were not allowed to cast their votes as the teashop owner had already ‘sold’ them, their “fingerprints – the inky fingerprints which the illiterate person makes on the ballot paper to indicate his vote” (TWT 97). Thus their fingerprints had already been taken and their votes cast in favor of the Great Socialist’s party. A person who insisted on casting his vote was declared mad and manhandled and killed by the Great Socialist’s supporters. They had already put up a tally of votes polled on a blackboard. Every one of the 2,341 voters had voted for the Great Socialist. And the Great Socialist candidate was declared to have won unanimously from the constituency. This was supposed to be a close election; and the teashop owner had got a ‘good price’ for each one of them from the Great Socialist’s party. Balram proclaims himself to be “the india’s most faithful voter, “yet he is still has not seen the inside of a voting booth” (TWT 102).

Balram calls Indian election one of the ‘three diseases’ of the country, the other two being typhoid and cholera. Now that the fever of election was catching and everyone was talking about it ‘like eunuchs discussing the Kama sutra’. Even the government employee including policemen were canvassing for the Great Socialist. A special *pooja* was held to for the Great Socialist’s victory and mutton *biryani* was distributed on paper plates in front of the temple; and in the evening there was free booze for all. The next morning a posse of policemen came to Laxmagarh and an election officer read out the voting officers in the market place. But the people in the Darkness were not allowed to vote It had been so, Balram says, since the first general elections. Then he recalls his father’s election experience in his father’s voice: “I have seen twelve elections – five general, five state, two local – and someone else has voted for me twelve time. I’ve heard that people in; the other India get to vote for themselves – isn’t that something?” (TWT 100).

#### (5) Secularism

The Constitutions says that the States should treat all religions equally and impartially and that no state has an official religion. It also guarantees all people the freedom of conscience and the right to preach, practice and propagate any religion of their choice. But in the novel under study, Ram Persad, the number one driver of the Stork, had to hide his religion ( Islam). If the masters had known that he was a Muslim, they would have not offered him the job and treated him as the number one driver. So he had

changed his name but not his religious practices. The moment the fact was smelt by Balram, Ram Persad had no other chance but to pack up things and leave the place.

### **(6) Right to Culture and Education**

It implies that in a democratic country, culture and education of the minority should be promoted. But as it is discussed under the head secularism, the minority (Muslim driver) was not able to practice his own culture. If so how can we expect the promotion of their education. Further Free and compulsory education has become a fundamental right in 2008. But Balram narrates the state of education in the democratic India with his own experience. “If the Indian village is a paradise” says Balram, “then village is a paradise within a paradise.” The children in his village school were entitled to free meals at lunch-time \_ three *rotis*, yellow *daal* and pickles \_ but they never got to see any because the money allotted was misappropriated by the teacher who had a ‘legitimate excuse to steal the money’ because he said he hadn’t been paid his salary for six months. He was going to do nothing in the class till his pay cheque arrived. “Yet he was terrified of losing his job, because though the pay of any government job in India is poor, the incidental advantages are numerous” (TWT 33).

One fine morning an inspector came to the school on a ‘surprise inspection’. He pointed out the miserable state of affairs in the school. But the teacher was trembled by his side and said; “There is no duster in this class; there are no chairs; there are no uniforms for the boys. How much money have you stolen from the school funds, you sister-fucker?” (TWT 34)

Then the inspector wrote four sentences on the board at the wall and asked the students to read them out. But students after students stood up and blinked at the wall. At last Balram read the sentences . He tested Balram’s intelligence in different ways and the words of the teacher, “He is the smartest of the lot”(TWT 34) was proved and the inspector said, “ You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle” (TWT 35) And gave him the title ‘The White Tiger’ which is the rarest of animals that comes along only once in a generation. Before leaving, the inspector promised him government scholarship. That would help him to go to a real school – somewhere far away from there with a real uniform and to have real education. But such a smartest and worthiest child, Balram was forced to leave the school and sent to job by his family. To repay the loan borrowed for the marriage of his cousin sister.

### **(7) Right against exploitation**

Right against Exploitation condemns human trafficking, child labor, forced labor making it an offense punishable by law, and also prohibit any act of compelling a person to work without wages.

This right too was indirectly criticized in the novel, *The White Tiger*. In the line of story we are told that the smartest and the worthiest child, Balram was forced to leave the school and to work with his brother Kishan in the village teashop.

After the death of his father, Balram, Kishan and his cousin Dilip worked in Dhanbad in a teashop along the Ganga. Balram calls those working in teashops

“Human spiders that crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, ..... But that is your fate if you do your job well – with honesty, dedication, and sincerity, the way Gandhi would have done no doubt”

Throughout the story, Adiga exposes how the rich Indians exploit the poor and the poor awaits for chance to take revenge for it. To quote one instance; Balram was fascinated by a golden-haired girl they visited in a hotel and wanted to have the same experience. For that purpose he started to steal money from his master. But his resentment against Ashok grew: “The more I stole from him, the more I realize how much he had stolen from me”

### **(8) Justice (Right to Constitutional Remedies)**

Right to Constitutional Remedies ensures citizens to go to the supreme court to ask for enforcement or protection against violation of their fundamental rights. The Supreme Court has the jurisdiction to enforce the Fundamental Rights even against private bodies, and in case of any violation, award compensation as well to the affected individual.

In the above cited instances, all the fundamental rights have been violated, but no one had got the courage to go to the court or not even to protest against them. The reason is ‘The Indian family’. Family is the coop where Indians are trapped and tied to the coop. Only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed – ‘hunted, beaten and burned alive by the masters’ – can break out of the coop. This is not possible for a normal human being. They are the pale hens in the Rooster Coops. They smell the blood of others and they know fully that they are the next in line. Yet they do not rebel, or try to get out of the coop. If the exploited, are not able even to realize their fate how can we expect that they would go to the court. Even if they realize it, they don’t what to loose their family. Suppose they go to the court, there are entrepreneurs to break the law of the land. “ To break the law of his land – to turn bad news into good news – is the entrepreneur’s prerogative” (TWT 38).

### **(9) Right to privacy**

When Mukesh (Ashok’s brother) hands over a letter to Balram from his granny and reads it out, despite Ashok’s protest, with scant regard for Balram’s privacy on the plea: Mukesh remarks, “He has no sense of privacy. In the villages there are no separate rooms they just lie together at night and fuck like that. Trust me, he doesn’t mind. This is a disparity on the basis of rich and poor and on the basis locality (urban and rural).

From the above discussion we could boldly conclude that Aravind Adiga sarcastically mocks at the function Indian democracy left and right Throughout the novel. He thinks that it is because of the democratic set up that we are not able to overtake China. “We have this fucked-up system called parliamentary democracy. Otherwise, we’d be just like China-“. Further he insists that “We don’t deserve .... Parliamentary democracy, Father. We will never catch up with China for this single reason.”

Further he hopes for the end of this corrupted and polluted system of democracy soon saying that “the current situation cannot last long, with the Naxals getting stronger by the day.”

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